60 to 0 in One Decision Flat

by Hyde

BMW's art car program was founded in 1975 when Hervé Poulain, an auctioneer/race driver, asked his friend Alexander Calder to use his BMW 3.0 CSL as a canvas. While they don't select an artist annually, they have been pretty consistent and have produced 17 art cars up to this point. Artists include Warhol, Rauschenberg, and Lichtenstein, among others.

It was recently announced at a lovely shindig in his studio in New York that the newest BMW art car will be created (or painted or metallicized or flowered or ballooned) by chronically overfunded contemporary artist Jeff Koons. Koons could be seen soaking up the press, grinning as if his fee for the project was already in the bank and accruing interest.

Before I address my disillusionment with BMW's decision, it bears to point out that during the announcement event, while the A-list guests were sipping on delicious wine and eating canapés by the one and only Thomas Keller, Koons' assistants were busy toiling away at their paint-by-numbers canvases.

Working in full view of the revelers, the assistants never partook in the celebration, never paused, and were never acknowledged for their role in his 'artistic process.' While it is not uncommon for artists to have assistants help with paintings, sculptures, installations, performances and so on, only Koons takes the relationship to such a degree as was on display that night. Koons frequently does little to none of the work beyond the initial conception of the idea, leaving his labor force to do the actual exertion required to fulfill the reality of the artwork.

That being said, considering the current economic climate, I fail to understand why BMW would align themselves with someone who is known for such excessively expensive sculptures, not to mention sculptures that don't have the best track record for holding up once they depart Koons' studio (his "Tulip" sculpture at LACMA had to be sent for repairs mere months after installation). BMW's selection would have been more suitable in the heady and cash-laden years of the mid-2000s, when everyone in the art world was feeling a little more flush. With the hybrid, green, reusable, and sustainable being the major trends of the day, the gluttonous excess of Jeff Koons seems to be a manufactured and ostentatious choice.

In so many of their earlier selections, BMW seemed to be progressive and forward thinking. A previous artist, Olafur Eliasson, was an inspired choice for the company, and the car he created out of ice was an ethereal sculpture. While Olafur Eliasson is an accomplished artist and his car coincided with his retrospective at SFMOMA, he is by no means a household name, and I barely remember hearing news of Robin Rhode's car from 2009.

The press angle of this is borderline desperate. The only other artist who could pull in more press would be Damien Hirst, and with his newest show at Gagosian, titled “End of An Era”, and his latest foray back into painting, it seems that he might have even been more fitting due to his awareness of the changing times. Maybe I am projecting, but I can’t help but think that if BMW chose someone less showy, then the press would have been more intrigued: Why this artist? What are they going to do? The speculation for something unpredictable could have been a little more tantalizing. Granted, I don’t know the process BMW goes through to choose the artist. Do they approach multiple artists? Does it have to be approved by the highest of the high who might not know much about art? Did they approach another artist who turned them down because they didn’t want to be associated with something so corporate or restrictive or some other reason that I can’t think of at the moment? I realize that I am playing my own devil’s advocate here, but it is so hard to wrap my head around how they could settle with Koons after Eliasson, Holzer, Hockney, Esther Mahlangu, and so many other great artists.

I know this is an afterthought, but I must include this because I would be remiss to not mention the demographics from which BMW plucks its artists. Out of 17 art cars, 15 have been done by men. Granted, they have been much more diverse lately, which I commend, but again with the backtracking. I didn’t want to have to do this, but BMW, you forced my hand. Here is my list of ladies who are more than up to the task, followed by a couple guys who I wouldn’t have minded tackling the project. I will stick to artists whose work has seen the inside of major museums because, let’s be honest, it would never be anyone of a lesser success.

Worthy Ladies: Barbara Kruger, Tara Donovan, Rachel Whiteread, Fiona Apple, Cornelia Parker, Katharina Grosse, Jean Shin.

Worthy Men: Anish Kapoor, Robert Irwin, Maurizzio Cattelan, Ai WeiWei, Martin Creed, Zhang Huan, Tom Sachs, Charles Ray.